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Decision Not To Aid Pueblo Came From Pacific, Not D.C.

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[Washington Bureau of The Sun]

Washington, Jan. 24—A decision against sending planes to the aid of the U.S.S. Pueblo when it was being seized by North Koreans was made by commanders in the Pacific with no intervention of any kind from Washington, defense officials declared tonight.

The situation they described regarding the capture of the intelligence-gathering ship contrasted markedly with that in other crises of recent years when the Government here immediately took control and directed events.

In this incident, officials maintained, Robert S. McNamara, Secretary of Defense, was informed at 12.23 A.M. yesterday that the Pueblo had been boarded 38 minutes earlier.

McNamara Did Nothing

McNamara did nothing as far as seizure of the ship by four North Korean patrol boats was concerned, officials said, adding only a "no comment" concerning other actions that were taken.

Those other actions apparently concerned the turnaround of the aircraft carrier Enterprise, the guided-missile frigate Truxtun and three destroyers and their dispatch to the Sea of Japan instead of the South China Sea off Vietnam.

The nuclear-powered Enterprise and its escorts were reported tonight to have passed through the Tsushima Straits between Korea and Japan and to be in the Japan Sea awaiting orders, while the Government endeavored by diplomatic means to gain release of the ship and 83-man crew now held in North Korea's Wonsan harbor.

Earlier, the Pentagon assailed as propaganda the alleged spying 'confession' of the U.S.S. Pueblo's skipper, and declared that intercepted North Korean military messages themselves demonstrated that the ship was in international waters when seized.

Departing from the customary practice of not revealing intercepted information, Phil G. Goulding, Assistant Defense Secretary for public affairs, said in a statement that, when approached by North Korean patrol boats, the Pueblo's position "as determined by the radar track of the North Koreans themselves was 39 degrees 25 minutes north and 127 degrees 56 minutes east."

Goulding stated that this reported position was within a mile of the position reported by the Pueblo itself as four patrol boats surrounded it early yesterday and forced it into Wonsan harbor.

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This is the position identified in the first announcement as "approximately 25 miles from the mainland of North Korea."

Goulding issued his statement to counter the North Korean broadcast today of "confession" by Cmdr. Lloyd M. Bucher, the Pueblo's skipper, that his ship was spying for the Central Intelligence Agency and was but 7.6 miles off the North Korean coast when intercepted.

North Korea claims a 12-mile territorial waters limit.

"Unmistakable Evidence"

The style and wording of the document provide unmistakable evidence in themselves that this was not written or prepared by any American," Goulding said of the "confession."

The "confession" attributed to Bucher said:

"I have no excuse whatsoever for my criminal act as my ship intruded deep into the territorial waters of the Democratic Republic of North Korea and was captured by the . . . Korean People's Army in their self-defense action while conducting the criminal espionage activities."

The skipper was quoted as expressing hope that he and the Pueblo crew will be forgiven leniently" by North Korea.

"Our parents and wives and children at home are anxiously waiting for us to return home in safety," the "confession" concluded.

Goulding said the Pueblo's orders on its intelligence-collecting mission were "to stay at least 13 miles from North Korean territory."

"There is no evidence to suggest that these orders were disobeyed," he said. "There is much evidence, both from her own radio transmission and from the information broadcast from the North Koreans themselves in their own internal reports, that the orders were obeyed."

Goulding noted as an example of the "propaganda sham"

the statement attributed by North Korean radio to Bucher that the Central Intelligence Agency had promised him that "a lot of dollars would be offered to the whole crew members of my ship and particularly I myself would be honored."

Four were wounded, including one whose leg was blown off in circumstances still not clarified. This could have occurred when the crew destroyed the secret intelligence gear aboard the ship, although no information was forthcoming on this point.

Too Late For Rescue

As far as is publicly known, nothing has been heard from the Pueblo and its crew since 12.32 A.M. yesterday when it radioed that it was "going off the air."

The Government, at this time, is seeking by diplomatic means to win release of the ship and crew and is saying nothing of the military preparations that are going on.

There are three aircraft carriers in the western Pacific which presumably are available for duty in North Korean waters if called on. Besides the Enterprise, they are the Oriskany and the Toconderoga.

In Japan, the Air Force has three squadrons of fighters — about 54 airplanes in all — and a further squadron at Kadana, Okinawa.

The Air Force also has a squadron of fighters and a squadron of light bombers in the Philippines.

At the time the Pueblo was seized, there were eight American fighter planes in South Korea, four at Osan and four at Kunsan.

On Nuclear Alert

These planes are believed to be kept on nuclear alert at those bases.

There has been no official suggestion that any aircraft were launched or alerted during the Pueblo incident.

While the United States has some naval and air forces available in the Pacific, beyond those committed in Vietnam its only uncommitted ground forces are the two United States Army divisions, the 2d and 7th, in South Korea.